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ABSTRACT

A relevant question for educators is how adult learning and education can cultivate change with individuals and groups. M.D. Hohn (1998) identifies four types of change: change by exception, incremental change, pendulum change, and paradigm change. A change agent tries to bring about a change deliberately. The change process is transformative, is political, involves learning, and takes place over a period of time. Adult educators frequently act as change agents. Literature describing the change process and the learning that occurs as part of it uses terms or describes processes associated with adult learning, particularly transformative learning. Reflection is another term associated with both adult learning and change. The political aspects of change, including power, are also topics in adult learning. Because a change agent deliberately tries to bring about change, some adult educators may feel conflict in helping adults become aware of how society is structured and how their own experiences have been shaped by such factors as gender, race, and class. As Stephen Brookfield (1995) believes, the teacher of adults has the responsibility to help learners become critically reflective and think of themselves as individuals capable of taking action and changing the world. The adult educator who assumes the role of change agent should pay attention to the context; be prepared to be proactive; attend to learning; and build in action. (Contains 18 references.) (YLB)

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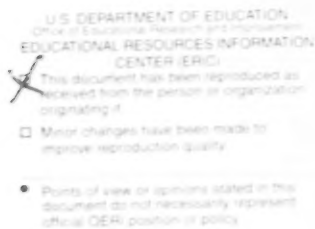
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Change: Connections to Adult Learning and Education

Phrases such as "change is inevitable," "change is constant," and "the only thing certain is change itself" are commonly heard when commiserating about the pace of modern life. As described in the fable ***Who Moved My Cheese?*** (Johnson 1998), humans have varying reactions to change: some welcome it, others tolerate it, but many dread it. The main idea underlying Johnson's book—that change is inevitable so we must learn to accept it—delivers a naive and simplistic message about a complex process. Many perspectives exist about change, but a common theme throughout the literature is that it is a process that involves learning (Macduff 1993). The question of how adult learning and education can cultivate change with individuals and groups is explored in this ***Digest***. Following a discussion of the change process, it examines the connection between change and adult education and adult learning, and it concludes with some suggestions for adult educators involved in the change process.

The Change Process

Different types of change exist. Hohn (1998) identifies four: change by exception, incremental change, pendulum change, and paradigm change. Change by exception occurs when an individual makes an exception to an existing belief system. For example, on the basis of an experience with a person of another culture, an individual might make an exception to what is fundamentally a racist belief system but only for that person, not for the entire culture. When change happens so gradually that an individual is not aware of it, it is incremental. Changes that result in extreme exchanges of points of view are considered pendulum changes. Paradigm change involves a fundamental rethinking of premises and assumptions, and both individuals and organizations can experience it. Paradigm change involves a changing of assumptions, beliefs, and values about how the world works. When adult educators speak of change, they are generally referring to this kind of change.

Someone who deliberately tries to bring about a change or innovation is known as a change agent (Havelock and Zlotolow 1995). A change agent is usually associated with facilitating change in an organization or institution (ibid.; Lippitt, Watson, and Westley 1958), but adult educators may assume a change agent role in working with individual learners. Whether working with organizations or individuals, by necessity, change agents engage "in the exercise of power, politics, and interpersonal influence" (Buchanan and Badham 1999, p. 615).

In facilitating change, a key element is understanding the existing power structure, including assessing "whose power moves things around" and whose power should be supported by the change agents (Arnold et al. 1991, p. 24). This facet of the change process includes understanding the social, organizational, and political identities and interests of those involved; focusing on what really matters instead of getting caught up in peripheral issues; assessing the agendas of all concerned; and planning for action (ibid.). Analysis of the first three areas will help a prospective change agent decide on the prudence or wisdom of taking action.

Change occurs over a period of time. The pace of the change process is irregular with the most common pattern seeming "to consist of occasional spurts of learning or change, separated by longer periods of apparent stability" (Lippitt, Watson, and Westley 1958, p. 267). Although change may seem to be constant at times, the truth is human beings could not endure constant change (Levine 1996). "One of the key ideas that drives the adult during a period of change is the idea that on the other side of change will come the down time—the time of stability" (ibid. , p. 1).

As described here, the change process is transformative, political, involves learning, and takes place over a period of time. How these characteristics connect to adult education and learning is discussed next.

The Adult Learning and Education Connection

Adult educators frequently act as change agents. An understanding of the connection between adult education theory and practice and the role of change can be helpful.

Adult Learning and Change

Literature describing the change process and the learning that takes place as a part of change (e.g., Hohn 1998; Lippert, Watson, and Westley, 1958; Page and Meerabeau 2000; Richardson 1998; Williams 1992) uses terms or describes processes that are associated with adult learning, particularly transformative learning, as defined by Mezirow (1991). Like transformative learning, change involves a questioning of assumptions and a fundamental rethinking of premises. The learning of prominent social activists, for example, began with "testing the old rules." During this initial step, the individuals used a questioning process to examine what they believed and why (Williams 1992).

Reflection is another term associated with both adult learning and change. In describing the learning that takes place during the change process, Lippitt, Watson, and Westley (1958) state that "during the learning period, the system accumulates a number of new facts or ideas which are stored away, as it were, for further consideration" (p. 267). In discussing teacher change, Richardson (1998) describes a process that has reflection as its foundation. During the reflection period, teachers assess their beliefs, goals, and results of changing approaches to their work. In adult education, reflection is also an important step in transformative learning theory (Mezirow 1991) and as well as in the ideas of Schön, whose book, ***Educating the Reflective Practitioner*** (1987), is frequently cited in the adult education literature. Periods of reflection may account for those times during the change process when nothing appears to be happening.

The political aspects of change, including power, are also topics discussed in adult learning, though only recently. Until the past decade, discussions of adult learning have been dominated by the psychological perspective that focuses on the individual learner (Merriam and Caffarella 1999). Now, however, there is increasing discussion and analysis of the context in which learning takes place, including "the larger systems in society, the culture and institutions that shape learning, the structural and historical conditions framing, indeed defining, the learning event" (ibid., p. 340). Cervero and Wilson (1994), for example, describe how these factors influence the context and shape the power structure by calling attention to the sociocultural nature of planning that must be understood in program development.

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Teaching for Critical Consciousness

Because a change agent deliberately tries to bring about change, some adult educators may feel conflict in helping adults become more aware of how society is structured and how their own experiences have been shaped by such factors as gender, race, and class (Tisdell, Hanley, and Taylor 2000). In discussing an inquiry-based staff development project, King (1998) describes her dilemma of building in participant experiences while pushing her agenda that included giving participants the opportunity to examine critically their assumptions and values about adult literacy education. In theory, she wanted to follow participatory principles, but in practice, she had in mind definite outcomes for how the participants would change and improve their work. Brookfield (1995), on the other hand, feels that it is the responsibility of the teacher of adults to help learners become critically reflective and to think of themselves as individuals who are capable of taking action and changing the world.

Adult Educators in the Change Process

A clear relationship exists between the change process and adult learning. The role of change agent is not appropriate in every situation and not all adult educators may be comfortable with the role. When an adult educator assumes the role of change agent, however, the following suggestions may guide the process.

Pay attention to the context. Whether acting as a change agent in an organization or with individual students, understanding the context is critical to success. Both organizations and individuals are shaped by factors that it is important to address in the process of change. Individual learners have norms and values that will influence the direction of change. When working with an organization or institution, an analysis of the context in advance should provide answers to such questions as "Will I be asked to do things that might be in conflict with my ethical beliefs and standards?" and "Are factors present that will prevent the change from occurring?"

Be prepared to be proactive. Underlying the change agent role is the assumption that the change agent will bring about change. When acting as a change agent, therefore, an adult educator must be prepared to initiate the change process even though fulfilling this role may raise questions about the ethics of facilitating change, including the responsible use of power in giving students tools they can use in their lives (Tisdell, Hanley, and Taylor 2000).

Attend to learning. Since learning and change are interconnected, an adult educator can assist those who are undergoing the change process in understanding the different kinds of learning as well as the learning cycle of the change process. Williams (1992), for example, talks about adult educators assisting learners in "'peeling the onion' of theory and practice that have produced current acceptable rules in any areas" (p. 47). Based on her experience of encouraging critical reflection, King (1998) suggests using strategies such as reading and discussing journal articles as ways of stimulating deeper analysis of issues. It is important to allow for periods of reflection to incorporate and/or practice new ways of thinking and acting. Finally, remembering that learning does not end after the change will ensure that any changes are implemented successfully. Page and Meerabeau (2000) found, for example, that the constructive action following reflection requires additional support from those initiating the change.

Build in action. Any change will not be complete unless it involves action. Taking action related to a new mental concept or to organizational change will increase the flow of information surrounding it and allow those involved to test it out, receive reaction to it, and involve others in learning about it (Williams 1992). Action will also provide the proof that the change has occurred.

Conclusion

Adult educators frequently act as change agents, although they may not be conscious that they are playing this role. Like learning, change is a complex process and understanding the relationship between learning and the change process can help adult educators be more purposeful in assisting with change.

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